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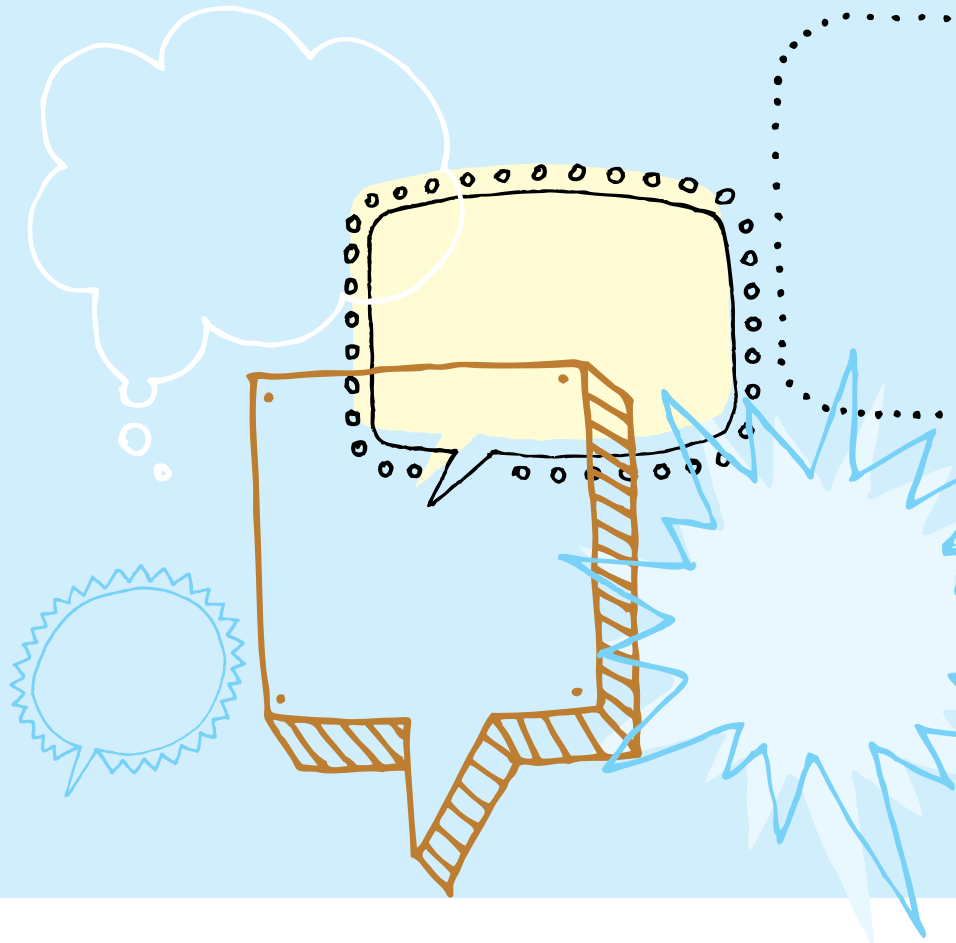
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Even languages are a “frill” for some low-cost airlines

A recent incident on a budget airline flight sparked Irene Macías to have her say.

On a recent trip from Madrid to a major UK airport, I witnessed an incident that brought home the beleaguered state in which modern languages find themselves in this country more than any depressing statistics about trends in languages at GCSE-level could ever do. When the refreshments trolley came down the aisle, a senior female passenger sitting one row in front of mine asked for “*Un café*”. The flight attendant looked distinctly put out. All she could muster for an answer was a bewildered “Mmm.” The lady went on to repeat “*Un café*”. Still, no response. Fortunately, one passenger travelling next to the lady in question came to the rescue and interpreted “Coffee please”. The flight attendant obliged.

It didn't finish there, though. Having apparently run out of sugar, she had to pay a second visit to our female passenger who, upon being handed it, was presented with a formulaic “If you need anything else, let us know” for good measure. The passenger, predictably, didn't reply.

A few things spring to mind. Firstly, given that refreshment trolleys have a limited number of wares and that cabin crew must serve teas and coffees hundreds of times in a normal day's work, the situation described above must have been wholly predictable for anybody whose job is to serve refreshments on a plane. How could it be that the member of staff could not work out that “*café*” *might*, just might be related to coffee?

I mean, they are not that far apart phonetically. I would have thought that this would be a big giveaway for most people, especially for those who work with an international clientele, and who happen to be mid-air carrying, you can bet on it, Spanish- and English-speaking passengers. How impermeable must you be to other languages to be thrown so visibly by something as simple as this? And we are not talking long sentences or numbers, heaven forbid! Was this a case of utter linguistic inability or an attitude problem? It's a hard call. The point is that a service provider that, by the very nature of its business, should be a champion of language skills and intercultural communication, clearly neglects these fundamental aspects and provides a standardised service where one size - English - fits all. Which takes me to the tag “If you need anything else, let us know.” If the passenger had not been able to place her simple order in English before, how on earth could she understand something as idiomatic as this? The

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flight attendant might as well have saved her breath.

It is not the first time I've observed that staff working for some of the most popular commercial airlines shamefully lack in language skills. My musings are the more poignant because they happen at a time when the study of languages in the UK at KS4 and, consequently, A-level and tertiary education feels under threat. The sector has just finished its last bout of self-reflection¹ - we seem to do this periodically - and

it's trying to find ways to convey the importance of languages for any society that wants to remain economically competitive and engage meaningfully with others in a multicultural world. In the case under scrutiny here, to have such a nice chunk of the air travel market within Europe and to overlook basic skills staff will need on a daily basis to operate efficiently, without making recruitment contingent upon

having them or being willing to acquire them, is either false economy, bad management, linguistic imperialism or all three together. The equivalent in any other country is impossible to imagine. I know for a fact that English, the foreign language *par excellence* in most European countries, is not only

taught through compulsory schooling from primary school in many cases these days, but that it is also a highly sought-after asset

that increases employability by a very high factor. Interestingly, according to a growing number of surveys, it's the same here in the UK: employers seek graduates with language skills, language graduates get bigger salaries, and so the argument goes. But the proof is in the pudding. On the continent, to think that you could work for an airline and not speak some English would just be absurd. UK based companies,

however, think nothing of playing you a recorded message in whatever the foreign language happens to be before take-off and that's that.

If the popularity this kind of air carrier currently enjoys is anything to go by, a sizeable proportion of travellers might still be willing to compromise comfort in return for cheap travel. But who knows if we are about to witness a sea change. Who would have predicted only two or three years ago that the expression "carbon footprint" would enter common parlance? Just as we are all becoming more mindful of our fragile environment, we might witness the birth of a discerning traveller who also expects a service respectful of cultural diversity and one of its most immediate manifestations: languages.

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"On the continent, to think that you could work for an airline and not speak some English would just be absurd"

¹Worton, M. (2009) *Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in Higher Education in England* [online]. Available from: www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_41